

St. Peter's, LBI 9/20/2020

“Oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?” That was my thought as I sat alone in the Rectory in Spotswood on February 1, 1988. I had just finished a funeral on my very first day as Rector of St. Peter's. I had been called to that parish after a year of searching and, in many cases, not even being invited to an interview. Let's back up a little to help you understand my feelings at the time.

My first ministry out of Seminary ended after 3.5 years as my marriage of 15 years was heading into separation and eventual divorce two years later. I resumed secular employment for those two years of separation to clear off debts and bills that had accumulated during seminary and my first three years earning 90% less than I had in business. During those two years I did what I'm doing now, two part time interim ministries. In 1987 I resumed full time ministry as Interim Rector at Holy Trinity Church in South River. During that year I was searching for a full-time position so that I could be ready to propose marriage to Nancy and be able to support her and our children.

Holy Trinity was a true blessing. They accepted me and Nancy, when she visited, and the worship was vibrant and spirit-filled. I knew the rule that said I couldn't be considered for their rector, and after many search processes I was called to St. Peter's Church. It couldn't be a worse match. I loved contemporary music and exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and full participation of all the people of God in the ministries of the Church. St. Peter's Rector had purchased the “new” 1979 Prayer Books, but got no further than Rite 1 Morning Prayer and Holy Eucharist on alternating Sunday's. Women had no roles in the worship ministries beyond the work of the Altar Guild. And no

Chalice Administrator: “That’s what we pay you to do” they said in the interview. I just couldn’t envision what it would be like to be Rector of a church like that. But since my prospects didn’t look great in other searches, I had accepted the call, and now I had to make the best of it.

The first few years were difficult. After Nancy and I got married, she said “I’m going back to Holy Trinity.” I said, “Well, you can, but this is where I am called to serve, so I won’t be going with you.” She stuck it out with me.

Over the next few years, we all began to grow. We developed a good relationship, and once they were confident that I was there for them, they became a little more open to trying new things. I said, “Look, Fr. Stone was retiring. He bought these new Prayer Books and basically said, ‘Let the next guy introduce them to the people.’ I’m the next guy. If you’re want to be in sync with the rest of the Episcopal Church, I need to introduce you to the whole Prayer Book. They agreed, and slowly we introduced Rite 2 and contemporary music and full participation of men and women, boys and girls in the liturgical ministries of the parish.

I ended up serving there for 11.5 years. We grew in numbers and in stewardship, and completed a major restoration project, while also starting outreach ministries to feed and clothe the people in need in our community. Those ministries continue to this day, 21 years after I left. Those turned into the best years of ministry in my life.

Nobody likes change. We want things to stay the same, with what we have grown accustomed to. But with our hearts and faith focused on Jesus and how to be better disciples, we took chances and grew to a new place together. Change is both stressful and exciting. I think you’ll discover that truth in the months and years ahead. But

change is always inevitable, and when it is engaged with open hearts and minds, it can be the source of new life.

Jonah hated change. The Assyrians were a major power threatening all of her neighbors. When God told him to preach against them because of their wickedness, he got in a boat headed in the opposite direction. If God was going to destroy Nineveh, he was sure not going to lift a finger to prevent it. You know what happened next. After the fish spit him out, God told him again to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's warning to them. This time he went into the midst of the city and said just eight words: "*Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*" And guess what happened?

The people repented, the king repented. *"¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."*

This is not what Jonah wanted. He wanted the familiar, jealous, wrathful God to pour down destruction on Israel's ancient enemy. How could his God look upon their past evil deeds, and spare them? Jonah wanted a strict accounting of their sins and retribution for their evil. Jonah didn't want God to show mercy.

And when the laborers worked all day in the scorching heat in the vineyard, they expected a full-day's pay. Giving the same pay to those who had only worked a few hours wasn't fair. They knew how the system worked and they didn't want it to change.

Jesus answer was that the owner has the right to change the rules in a way that is more than fair. If he wants to be generous with what is his, no one is being cheated. Grace can trump custom.

What is the spiritual lesson here? One lesson is that change is inevitable. While we may not be seeking change, we help ourselves as we prepare for change and open ourselves to receiving new and unexpected blessings in different ways. If you think back on your life, I'm sure you can identify numerous times that change came about without invitation, and how you grew into the person you are today because of those changes.

Whenever I wanted to change something at St. Peter's in Spotswood, I would explain to the congregation the reason for proposing the change. I also said I would ask for their feedback, but not right away. I wanted them to live into the experience of the change for a good period of time. I knew that initial responses would likely be negative. We just don't like change.

The other thing to remember is that we change, both individually and as a community. When I visited the church in Spotswood a couple years ago, I knew about one-third of the current members. Over the years many new families and individuals have joined the church. They bring change with them, and what was so familiar and important to the members in 1988 was not what was important to the many people who joined the church over the years.

At the heart of Christian discipleship is care for and love of our neighbor in addition to love of God. Love of your neighbor means not seeking your own preferences, but being open to what best communicates the Gospel and the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Every generation is different from those that came before. Many of us our baby-boomers. We were shaped by the experiences of church when our parents first took us, and as we grew to adulthood and raised families in our churches. The people who will

be moving to Long Beach Island in the years ahead will most likely be of the next generation. Gen X they're called. What will they find if they walk in the door?

Jesus begins his parable of the laborers in the vineyard by saying, "*The kingdom of heaven is like . . .*" What are we, as a church, called to be if not a reflection of, an icon of the kingdom of heaven on earth? Every sanctuary and the momentary transient members who gather there are like that vineyard and the laborers. What we learn is that in the kingdom of heaven there is no such thing as seniority. Those who arrive at the last moment are as loved as those who have been there for their whole lives. The person who arrives for the first time is as much a part of our Lord's church as the person who has been here all her life.

If St. Peter's Church is to be a place where a person encounters the kingdom of heaven, then we must banish all thoughts of it as "my church." It is our Lord's church. Like others who came before, we are simply passing through. But while we are here, let us welcome the first-time worshiper as we would our Lord himself. Banish all thoughts of "my preference" for how things should be. This is Christ's church. You are beloved, and the kingdom of heaven will be most experienced and most evident as you welcome every new face with that love, and say, "Welcome home to our Lord's church. We've been waiting for you"